An Ethnographic Study of Okinawa from the Post-War Reconstruction to the Rapid Economic Growth Period: Case Studies of Communities Seized by the US Forces and Graves Rebuilt after the End of the War

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This paper reviews previous studies on the post-World War II history of Okinawa to examine its rapid economic growth at the time of its occupation by the US Forces and analyses its reconstruction before its reversion to Japan by using the ratio of its vehicle ownership rate (number of vehicles divided by population) to the national average as an indicator. While being occupied by the US Forces, Okinawa imported daily commodities and automobiles from the main islands of Japan. As the costs were covered by profits from military bases, the production capacity of Okinawa did not grow, leading to trade deficits. Thus, although the rapid economic growth of Okinawa under the US occupation kept pace with that of Japan, these two economies were totally different in terms of their productivity and balance of trade.

This research takes an ethnographic approach to analyze the rapid economic growth, reviewing Okinawan community and family chronicles compiled by community and family members themselves and reconstructing their lives from their descriptions of their experiences during and after the war. First, this paper discusses land-based livelihood restoration by comparing the following three types of communities seized by the US Forces: (i) those not returned after the reversion; (ii) those returned after the reversion; and (iii) those not returned but maintaining personal ties.

Then, this study analyses the graves rebuilt by family-based organizations from the post-war reconstruction to the rapid economic growth period. It was a restart of ancestor-worship rituals that had been discontinued since the start of the war, relationship building between survivors, and memorial services for the war dead. This paper uses the following seven examples as case studies: (i) the relocation of graves soon after the end of the war (1952); (ii) the graveyard reconstruction project (1953); (iii) (iv) the grave relocation projects implemented under the urban planning of Naha City (1954, 1951–1955); (v) the transfer of graves and the public honoring of great figures (1955–1958); (vi) (vii) the grave repair and restoration projects supported by donations from families (1958, 1970). Although the rebuilding of graves was placed at the core of ancestor worship, the implementation processes were different and difficult as the engineering works required fundraising from surviving families.
Even after the reversion of Okinawa to Japan, the reconstruction of graves has remained important to Okinawan families up to the present day. This issue is open to further consideration and discussion from the viewpoint of the post-war and contemporary history of Okinawa and from an ethnographic perspective.

Key words: Rapid economic growth of Okinawa, occupation by the US Forces, communities seized by the US Forces, post-war reconstruction of graves, community and family chronicles